DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 108 254 CS 202 141

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TITLE Words Old and New, Used and Abused: Language Study in Advanced Composition.
PUB DATE Mar 75
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (26th, St. Louis, March 13-15, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Composition (Literary); *English Instruction; Higher Education; *Language Instruction; Language Skills; *Language Usage; Persuasive Discourse; Propaganda; *Writing Exercises; Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

To speak, write, and react to language with awareness is to live at least somewhat more fully than to be oblivious to the manifold nuances and potentialities of language. With this idea in mind, the rationales, strategies, and implications of three language-related assignments for advanced composition are presented. The first assignment asks student writers to identify and interpret ten examples of political language (in the Orwellian sense), paying careful attention to stale imagery, pretentious diction, imprecise meanings, and wordiness. The second assignment asks students to select eight major symbols and to identify their implications. The third assignment, in which students report on an incident or present a character sketch, focuses on language as a combination of interpretive and manipulative devices. The purpose of these writing assignments is to raise consciousness and increase awareness. (RB)

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Words Old and New, Used and Abused: Language Study in Advanced Composition

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Life is language (at least for teachers of composition) is awareness. To speak, write, and react to language with awareness is to live at least somewhat more fully than if one is oblivious to the manifold nuances and potentialities of his own language. As I shall demonstrate through a discussion of the rationales, strategies, and implications of three language-related assignments for advanced composition, the study of language, like the study of anything else, can be an experience of continual consciousness-raising. And it is with this in mind that I want to enable students to discover for themselves the truth of this pronouncement by my favorite linguist, Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty:

> "'When I use a word . . . , it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less.'
> 'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean different things.'
> 'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master--that's all.'" (Through the Looking-Glass)

The first, perhaps familiar, assignment, on "Politics and the English Language," asks student writers to identify and interpret ten examples of political language (in the Orwellian sense), lumbering with stale imagery, pretentious diction, imprecise, meaningless, and excessive words. It is intended to make them aware of the discrepancies between what political language says and what it really means, the linguistic mechanisms by which this is accomplished, and the human consequences of such verbal manipulation.

The students are to select ten illustrations of "political" language used by persons with overtly or covertly vested interests, from common sources, such as newspaper articles, speeches, or other writings or remarks on subjects controversial or on which there are multiple possible points of view. They then identify each term and give an example of how it is used, preferably by quoting it in ample enough context to make its usage apparent. They should explain the ostensible meaning, or multiple meanings, of each word or phrase, and identify its connotations.

Then they should consider what each word or term is covering up, and indicate how they can tell this and what the word really means. They should conclude the discussion of each word or term with some informed speculation on the user's motivation and intent. For this they may need to consult outside sources, if the original context is too obscure.

Presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, National Meeting, St. Louis, March, 1975.

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The following chart summarizes some of the typical discrepancies between the appearances of manipulative, political words or phrases and their realities.

APPEARANCE	REALITY
a)High status, position, power	a)Low status or position, little or no power
1)sanitary engineer	1)garbage collector
2)exceptional child	2)mentally retarded child
b)Positive or ameliorated image	b)Grim fact/reality
1)new life hamlet	1)refugee camp
2)disadvantaged	2)down and out
3)pacification	3)war
c)Bland inoffensiveness	c)Brutality
resources control program	defoliation
d)Dehumanization, depersonalization	d)Humanization
1)body count	1)deaths, murders
2)"That statement is inoperative."	2)"I was wrong." or "I lied."
e)High minded nobility	e)Baseness, self-serving, or deliberately evasive language
"We say we don't want to turn it into a circus. We want our testimony received in a judicious and prohibitive way. We are willing to have our people go, but only under the right circumstances." John Ehrlichman to Nixon, et al, during the Watergate cover-up	"We won't cooperate."

This assignment is designed to make the students aware of when they or others are the victims of these sorts of deceptive uses of the language, and also of occasions when they themselves might employ language in such manipulative, self-serving ways. Through considering the implications of such linguistic deviousness and abuse, it is hoped that the students will also become more responsible listeners to, and speakers and writers of, their language.

The paper on "Politics and the English Language" gains in depth and versatility when used in combination with another writing assignment, "Symbols and Dictionaries." This requires students to examine dictionari to determine the connections between objective linguistic or other meanings of symbols, and the subjective, idiosyncratic meanings the same symbols might have in individual contexts.

It has been my experience that even the most sophisticated students are naive about dictionaries. They regard them--all written by Noah Webster, of course--or was it Daniel?--as authoritarian and prescriptive and, they think, rightly so. Dictionaries for them are repositories of fixed and immutable spellings, pronunciations, and meanings of words.

They unthinkingly equate the first meaning of the word whose definition they seek with its current meaning, even if the dictionary is arranged on historical principles. They seldom realize that reputable college and unabridged dictionaries are repositories of a plenitude of useful information, from grammar to the history of the language to proof-reading symbols to opinions on usage. "If you've seen one dictionary you've seen 'em all," they think--and they've seen one. So "Symbols and Dictionaries" is intended, in part, to dispel these misconceptions.

"Symbols and Dictionaries" asks the students to select eight major symbols either occurring naturally in or artifically imposed on the matrix of a familiar occupation, situation, event, ceremony, or social milieu (for instance: truck driver, singles bar, an election, a wedding or funeral, life in suburbia or in the ghetto).

The students are then to identify the dimensions/implications of these symbols, both private and public. For instance, what does a particular wedding ring in a particular wedding ceremony mean to the bride? the groom? to the person performing the ceremony? to the parents of the couple? to the jeweler? to the sociologist watching the formation of another nuclear family? to the writer of the paper? What does the wedding reception signify to the various participants? The nature and expense and extent of the food and drink and gifts? And so on.

Then they are to check each of the eight symbolic terms in the Oxford English Dictionary and supplements, Webster's New International Dictionary, second and third editions, a reputable college dictionary not derived from Webster's III, and in a paperback abridgment of a colleg dictionary. They are to determine whether or not any two or three of the connotative meanings they had found attributed to these symbols in their "real life" context are indicated in any way in any of the five dictionaries, either etymologically, historically, or in contemporary terms, either in formal, informal, or slang usage.

They are to incorporate their findings in a brief report on each of the eight symbols, considering therein whether or not there is any historically or generally acknowledged contemporary evidence to verify any among the author's collections of meanings of symbols, or whether the symbol derives its meaning entirely from its context or from the writer's private connotations. Full bibliographic information for the dictionaries is to be included in a brief bibliography--a good way to incorporate some awareness of bibliographic form!

The purposes of this assignment are varied. It should enhance the students' awareness of the nature of symbolling behavior--that the meanings of symbols are arbitrary and imposed by the users--and perceivers--even if the symbols occur naturally in a given context. They should also realize that a given symbol (such as the wedding ring) may have multiple meanings, even in a single context, depending on the needs, values, previous experiences, dominant concerns, and cultural and current milieus of the perceivers and users of that symbol.

The assignment is also, obviously, intended to lead students to a closer examination of some standard historical, unabridged, and college dictionaries. The dictionary investigation reveals the essentially denotative nature of many dictionary definitions for words for which the students will have an essentially connotative definitions or sets of definitions.

For instance, "roller," in the sense of "a hollow, cylindrical object upon which hair is rolled up for setting in smooth waves" (Random House Dictionary, college edition, 1968, meaning 4) is essentially an implement. The American Heritage Dictionary expands on the implement meaning, identifying the cylinder as made of foam rubber or wire mesh, and producing curls as well as waves. Yet neither dictionary conveys the senses of the ludicrous or the violation of social proprieties that pink plastic rollers worn to a sports event or party by Mrs. Middle America might connote to a viewer of a higher social or economic class--nor the snobbery that might accompany such attitudes. And what would the connotations be if we saw such rollers on a man--in any context?

Webster's II (1954) does not even define "roller in the above denotative sense. The students should realize that not all dictionaries are current or reflect up-to-the-minute usage, mostly because (except for the OED) they are products of the era of their composition. Students should see that the language changes faster than the dictionary makers can accommodate it. A comparison of the '50s and '60s definitions for "pot," "grass," "fuzz," "pig," "mainline,"--even "Dr. Speckl"--will make the point. As a result, they should become aware that neither the language nor the dictionaries are rigid or immutable. This assignment helps them to understand, perhaps for the first time, that all the meanings of words, even common words, are not in the dictionary.[1] They will also learn that not all contemporary dictionaries are alike in scope, thoroughness, coverage, patterns of organization, or usage labels of the same word; one man's "informal" usage is another man's "slang" or even "vulgar." The students' search for the origins or verifications of their own vocabulary usages should also give them some conception of the significance and uses of etymology, a frequently neglected aspect of the dictionary.

Some of these considerations about dictionaries can be made apparent through other assignments--the standard comparison and contrast of dictionaries along various dimensions, or a report on the historical development of a word of Old English origin. However, I have found the assignment just described to be the most compelling of those I've tried. It grows out of the students' current concerns, interests, and experiences, and it helps them to teach themselves--over time the most enduring way to learn.

The third assignment focuses on language as a combination of interpretive and manipulative devices, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the interpretations are themselves forms of manipulation of either the subject or the reader or both. I refer to a writing assignment asking the students to report on an incident, event, place, or confrontation, or to present a character sketch using the techniques of the "new" journalism, a la Tom Wolfe, Norman Mailer, Joan Didion, and others.

Unlike the insidiously manipulative language analyzed in my assignment modeled on Orwell's "Politics and the English Language," the language and techniques of much of the new journalism are scarcely subtle, if not downright blatant. As defined by Tom Wolfe in "The New Journalism,"[2] the "new" techniques of journalism are the old--that is, familiar--techniques of fiction. Paramount among them are five characteristics usually employed in some combinations, rather than in isolation:

1) Scene-by-scene construction: "telling the story by moving from scene to scene and resorting as little as possible to sheer historical narrative" (Wolfe, The New Journalism, p. 31)

2) Recording dialogue in full:
to define character
to involve the reader as completely as possible

3) Shifting point of view--among the first person (the author's or reporter's), the subject, and others involved with or observing the subject. This may be abrupt, and may occur several times even within a single paragraph. (Wolfe, pp. 18-20)

4) Detailing the status life: "the recording of everyday gestures, habits, manners, customs, styles of furniture, clothing, decoration, styles of traveling, eating, keeping house, modes of behaving toward children, servants, superiors, inferiors, peers, plus the various looks, glances, poses, styles of walking and other symbolic details that might exist within a scene." (Wolfe, p. 32)

5) Stylistic characteristics: "the lavish use of dots, dashes, exclamation points, italics, and occasionally punctuation that never existed before : : : : : : : : : : and of interjections, shouts, nonsense words, onomatopoeia, mimesis, pleonasms, the continual use of the historical present, and so on." (Wolfe, p. 21)

Recording the dialogue, employing the shifting point-of-view, and a variety of conspicuous and exaggerated characteristics of style are in effect shaping the language to re-create the linguistic mannerisms as well as the psychologies and personalities of other speakers or characters. These techniques are apparent, typically, as Wolfe depicts a confrontation between a Flak Catcher, a professional civil service bureaucrat in an antipoverty agency, and the "Mau-maus," "big yoyos, just one solid welded hulk, the size of an oil burner,"[3] protesting about various social and economic inequities, real and imagined, as they hassle Mr. Charlie:

> "Hey, Brudda," the main man says. He has a really heavy accent. "Hey, Brudda, how much you make?"
> "Me?" says the Flak Cather. "How much do I make?"
> "Yeah, Brudda, you. How much money you make?"
> [although this dialogue is ostensibly reported by a third person omniscient observer, it also conveys the point of view of each of the speakers]
> Now the man is trying to think in eight directions at once. He tries out a new smile. He tries it out on the bloods, the Chicanos, and the Filipinos, as if to say, 'As one intelligent creature to another, what do you do with dumb people like this?" [the above from the Flak Catcher's viewpoint] But all he gets

is the glares, and his mouth shimmies back into the terrible sickening grin, and then you can see that there are a whole lot of little muscles all around the human mouth, and his are beginning to squirm and tremble . . . [Wolfe's ellipses throughout] He's fighting for control of himself . . . It's a lost cause. . . [until the last phrase the viewpoint is Wolfe's omniscient narrator's; the "lost cause" seems to be a combination of the narrator's interpretation coinciding with the Flak Catcher's]

"How much, Brudda?" [exaggerated style and onomatopoeia]

Ba-ram-ba-ram-ba-ram-ba-ram--they keep beating on the floor.

"Well," says the Flak Catcher, "I make $1,100 a month."

"How come you make so much?"

[speakers' viewpoints, as reported omnisciently]

"Wellllll"--the grin, the last bid for clemency . . . and now the poor man's eyes are freezing into little round iceballs [omniscient narrator's interpretation], and his mouth is getting dry [Flak Catcher's point of view] --

"How come you make so much? My fadda and mudda both work and they only make six hundred and fifty." [Mau-maus' point of view]

Oh shit, the cat kind of blew it here. That's way over the poverty line, about double, in fact. It's even above the guideline for a family of twelve. [Flak Catcher's viewpoint] You can see that fact register with the Flak catcher, and he's trying to work up the nerve to make the devastating comeback. [narrator's point of view] But he's not about to talk back to these giants. [Flak Catcher's perspective][4]

But though the techniques are obvious, some of their effects are more insidious, for they influence the readers' responses in ways that are often non-logical and non-rational. The techniques that employ humor, sarcasm, satire, flippancy, and irony are among those of indirect argument. They often put down either the subject--or all the subjects (certainly neither the Mau-maus nor the Flak Catcher come off well)--or both subject and reader, if the reader identifies with the subject. However, on occasion, as in most of Gay Talese's portraits in Fame and Obscurity, they can evoke considerable compassion.

If students understand these characteristics of the new journalism, they should be alert to their positive potential of wit, drama, vividness, and conciseness. These provide for abundant variations in style, tone, and presentation. Moreover, as aware readers and writers, the students should be better able to cope with the manipulative abuses latent in some of this writing.

Thus I have demonstrated three different writing assignments for Advanced Composition (which could be modified for freshman composition, as well) that help students to become aware of the connotative implications of the English language. It is hoped they will be able to hear both the words and the music as they play upon this magnificent instrument with scrupulousness, sensitivity, and skill.

Footnotes

[1] It would be interesting to try an experiment to determine dictionary users' reactions once they discover that their connotative meaning of a word isn't in the dictionary. Will they abandon their usage? Will they conclude that the dictionary isn't comprehensive? or up-to-date? Or will they decide that no volume or multiple volume dictionary can comprehend the manifold personal and private connotations of words? Or will they have other reactions?

[2] In The New Journalism, with an Anthology edited by Tom Wolfe and E. W. Johnson (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), pp. 3-36.

[3] "Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers," in Radical Chic & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1970; rpt. New York: Bantam, 1971), p. 129.

[4] "Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers," pp. 137-138.